

**LIGNOCELLULOSE BASED HYBRID LAMINATE COMPOSITE:  
PHYSICAL, MECHANICAL AND FLAMMABILITY PROPERTIES  
OF OIL PALM FIBER/GLASS FIBER REINFORCED EPOXY RESIN.**

**by**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	xv
ABSTRAK	xviii
ABSTRACT	xix

### **CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Lignocellulose Fiber Composites: Overview	1
1.2 Objectives of The Research	3

### **CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

2.1 Composite Materials	4
2.1.2 Definition of Composite	4
2.1.3 Classifications of Composite Materials	5
2.2 Fiber Reinforced Plastic Composites	6
2.2.1 Matrices	6

2.2.1.1 Thermoset	7
2.2.1.2 Thermoplastic	8
2.2.2 Fiber Reinforcement	10
2.2.2.1 Reinforcement Forms	12
2.2.3 Fiber Matrix Interface	14
2.3 Lignocellulose Fiber Composite	15
2.3.1 Classification of Lignocellulose Fibers	16
2.3.2 Chemical Composition of Lignocellulose Fibers	17
2.3.2.1 Cellulose	18
2.3.2.2 Hemicellulose	19
2.3.2.3 Lignin	19
2.3.2.4 Pectin	20
2.3.2.5 Waxes	20
2.3.3 Physical and Mechanical Properties of Lignocellulose Fibers	20
2.3.4 Oil Palm Empty Fruit Bunch Fiber and Its Composites	22
2.3.5 Limitations of Lignocellulose Fibers	25
2.4 Hybrid Fiber Composites	28
2.4.1 Hybrid Fiber Composite Classifications	28
2.4.2 Hybrid Effects	30
2.4.2 Lignocellulose Based Hybrid Composites	33

## **CHAPTER 3 – MATERIALS AND EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

3.1 Materials	34
3.1.1 Matrix	34
3.1.1.1 Epoxy	34
3.1.1.2 Curing Agent	35
3.1.1.3 Diluent	36
3.1.2 Reinforcement Fibers	36
3.1.2.1 E – Glass Fibers	36
3.1.2.2 Oil Palm Empty Fruit Bunch Fiber	37
3.2 Experimental Procedures	38
3.2.1 Preparation of Epoxy Polyamide System	38
3.2.2 Preparation of Random Oil Palm Empty Fruit Bunch (OPEFB) Fiber Mat	38
3.2.3 Laminate Composite Preparation Process	39
3.2.3.1 Impregnation and Curing Process of the Laminate Composite	40
3.3 Testing and Characterization	43
3.3.1 Physical Properties	43
3.3.1.1 Oil Palm Fiber Density Determination	43
3.3.1.2 Composite Density Measurement	44
3.3.1.3 Fiber Weight Fraction ( $W_f$ ) and Fiber Volume Fraction ( $V_f$ )	45
3.3.1.4 Void Content (ASTM D 2734-70)	46
3.3.1.5 Moisture Content Analysis of Oil Palm Fiber Mat	46
3.3.2 Mechanical Testing	47
3.3.2.1 Tensile Test (ASTM D 638)	47

3.3.2.2 Flexural Test (ASTM D 790)	48
3.3.2.3 Izod Impact Test (ASTM D 256)	49
3.3.3 Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)	50
3.3.4 Image Analyzer	50
3.3.5 Layer Thickness Determination	50
3.3.6 Water Absorption Properties of Composites (ASTM D 5229)	51
3.3.7 Flammability Test (ASTM D 635)	51
3.3.8 Theoretical Predictions	53

## **CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

4.1 Effect of Glass Fiber Loading on The Properties of Oil Palm Fiber/Glass Fiber Hybrid Bi-Layer Laminate Composite	54
4.1.1 Physical Properties	54
4.1.2 Tensile Properties	58
4.1.2.1 Tensile Stress Strain Behavior	58
4.1.2.2 Tensile Strength	61
4.1.2.3 Elongation at Break	66
4.1.2.4 Young's Modulus	69
4.1.3 Impact Properties	70
4.1.4 Flexural Properties	79
4.1.4.1 Flexural Strength	79
4.1.4.2 Flexural Modulus	86
4.1.5 Water Absorption Properties	88

4.1.6 Flammability Properties	93
4.2 Effect of Stacking Sequence on The Properties of Oil Palm Fiber/Glass Fiber Hybrid Composite	99
4.2.1 Physical Properties	99
4.2.2 Flexural Properties	102
4.2.2.1 Flexural Strength	102
4.2.2.2 Flexural Modulus	106
4.2.3 Impact Properties	108
4.2.4 Water Absorption Properties	113
4.2.5 Flammability Properties	114
4.3 Effect of Fiber Architecture (Woven Fabric) on The Properties of GF/EFB/GF and GF/EFB/GF and EFB/GF/EFB Hybrid Composites	118
4.3.1 Physical Properties	118
4.3.2 Impact Properties	120
4.3.3 Flexural Properties	124
4.3.3.1 Flexural Strength	124
4.3.3.2 Flexural Modulus	128
4.3.4 Water Absorption Properties	129
4.3.5 Flammability Properties	130

## **CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES**

5.1 Conclusions	134
5.2 Suggestions for Future Studies	136
<b>REFERENCES</b>	138
<b>APPENDICES</b>	149



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1:	Some typical properties of thermoset and thermoplastic resins	Page 9
Table 2.2:	Chemical composition of some common lignocellulose fibers (Bledzki <i>et al.</i> , 1999; Sreekala <i>et al.</i> , 1997)	17
Table 2.3:	Mechanical and physical properties of lignocellulose fibers and synthetic fibers (Sreekala <i>et al.</i> , 1997; Bledzki <i>et al.</i> , 1999 and Lilholt and Lawther, 2003)	21
Table 3.1:	Typical properties of Clear Epoxy Resin 331	34
Table 3.2:	Properties of Epoxy Hardener A062	35
Table 3.3:	Physical data of Benzyl Alcohol	36
Table 3.4:	Chemical composition of Oil Palm Fiber	37
Table 3.5:	Resin formulations	42
Table 3.6:	Bi-layer composite formulations	42
Table 3.7:	Tri-layer composite formulations	42
Table 4.1:	Physical characteristics of bi-layer hybrid composites	55
Table 4.2:	Relationship between the relative volume fraction of glass fibers and the number of glass fiber plies in the bi-layer hybrid laminate composite	65
Table 4.3:	Relative thickness of oil palm fiber and glass fiber layer	88
Table 4.4:	Physical properties of the hybrid composites	100
Table 4.5:	Extent of burning of the hybrid composites	115
Table 4.6:	Physical properties of hybrid composites	118
Table 4.7:	Extent of burning of EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites	131

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1: Classifications of fibers (Lilholt and Lawther, 2003)	11
Figure 2.2: Schematic diagram of different woven fabric styles	14
Figure 2.3: Molecular structure of cellulose	18
Figure 2.4: Molecular structure of lignin	19
Figure 3.1: Random Oil Palm Fiber Mat	39
Figure 3.2: Schematic diagram of laminate preparation process	40
Figure 3.3: Schematic diagram of bi-layer and tri-layer hybrid laminate composites. ((a) EFB/GF bi-layer hybrid composite, (b) GF/EFB/GF and (c) EFB/GF/EFB tri-layer hybrid laminate composites). Shaded areas represent glass fibers while non-shaded areas are oil palm fibers	41
Figure 3.4: Flammability Test Fixture	52
Figure 4.1: SEM micrograph of tensile fractured surface of oil palm fiber reinforced composite. Clean surface of oil palm fibers indicates weak adhesion between the fibers and matrix (magnification 50x).	56
Figure 4.2: SEM micrograph of tensile fractured surface of glass fiber reinforced composite (magnification 500x).	56
Figure 4.3: Tensile stress-strain behavior of glass fiber composite, oil palm fiber composite and hybrid composites.	58
Figure 4.4: SEM micrograph of tensile fractured surface of hybrid composite at 90 wt.% loading of glass fibers. Fracture surface of oil palm fiber layer. (magnification 500x)	60
Figure 4.5: SEM micrograph of tensile fractured surface of hybrid composite at 90 wt.% loading of glass fibers. Fracture surface of glass fiber layer. (magnification 500x)	60
Figure 4.6: Effect of glass fiber loading on the tensile strength of oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composite.	61
Figure 4.7: SEM micrograph of cross section of oil palm fiber composite. Arrows indicate irregular size and shape of the oil palm fibers (magnification 101x)	62

Figure 4.8:	SEM micrograph of cross section of oil palm fiber bundle in epoxy matrix.(magnification 201x).	62
Figure 4.9:	SEM micrograph of the cross section of hybrid composite at 0.8 volume fraction of glass fibers. The distinct layering of the glass fibers and oil palm fibers can be observed in the cross section of the hybrid composite.(magnification 17x).	66
Figure 4.10:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the elongation at break of oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composite.	67
Figure 4.11:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the stiffness of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer composite.	69
Figure 4.12:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the impact strength of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer composite.	71
Figure 4.13:	Photograph of impact fracture sample of oil palm fiber composite.	72
Figure 4.14:	Photograph of impact fracture sample of glass fiber composite.	73
Figure 4.15:	SEM micrograph of impact fractured surface of oil palm fiber composite (magnification 101x).	73
Figure 4.16:	Photographs of impact fractured samples of hybrid bi-layer composites <b>(a)</b> and <b>(b)</b> 0.1 volume fraction of glass fibers; <b>(c)</b> and <b>(d)</b> 0.8 volume fraction of glass fibers. Dotted arrow indicates delamination at the glass fiber/oil palm fiber interface.	75
Figure 4.17:	SEM micrograph of the hybrid bi-layer impact fracture surface of oil palm fiber layer when impacted at the glass fiber layer. <b>(a)</b> 0.1 volume fraction of glass fiber <b>(b)</b> 0.8 volume fraction of glass fiber (magnification x101)	78
Figure 4.18:	SEM micrograph of the hybrid bi-layer impact fracture surface of oil palm fiber layer when impacted at the oil palm fiber layer. <b>(a)</b> 0.1 volume fraction of glass fiber <b>(b)</b> 0.8 volume fraction of glass fiber (magnification 101x)	79
Figure 4.19:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the flexural strength of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer composite.	81
Figure 4.20:	Fracture images of oil palm fiber, glass fiber and hybrid composites. Crack initiation occurred at the tensile side of the samples.	85
Figure 4.21:	Image of the glass fiber layer compression surface of the hybrid composite after subject to flexural test.	85

Figure 4.22:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the flexural modulus of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer composite.	87
Figure 4.23:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the water absorption properties of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composite.	89
Figure 4.24:	SEM micrograph of the oil palm fiber surface structure.	91
Figure 4.25:	Schematic diagram of water absorption through a laminate composite. Arrows indicate the water absorption path through the six surfaces or edges of the composite.	92
Figure 4.26:	Schematic diagram of water absorption through the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composite. Arrows indicate the water absorption path through the five surfaces of the hybrid bi-layer laminate composite.	93
Figure 4.27:	Effect of glass fiber loading on the extent of burning of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composite	94
Figure 4.28:	(a) Image of oil palm fiber composite before exposed to fire. (b) Image of oil palm fiber composite after exposed to fire.	95
Figure 4.29:	(a) Image of glass fiber composite before exposed to fire. (b) Image of glass fiber composite after exposed to fire.	96
Figure 4.30:	(a) Image of hybrid composite at 0.1 $V_f$ of glass fibers before exposed to fire. (b) Image of hybrid composite at 0.1 $V_f$ of glass fibers after exposed to fire.	98
Figure 4.31:	A two dimensional schematic diagram of EFB/GF, GF/EFB/GF and EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composites	101
Figure 4.32:	Effect of stacking sequence on the flexural strength of the hybrid composites	102
Figure 4.33:	Flexural fracture image of the GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite.	105
Figure 4.34:	Flexural fracture image of EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite.	106
Figure 4.35:	Effect of stacking sequence on the flexural modulus of the hybrid composites	107
Figure 4.36:	Effect of stacking sequence on the impact strength of the hybrid composites.	109

Figure 4.37:	Impact fracture image of EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite	111
Figure 4.38:	SEM micrograph of fracture surface of the oil palm fiber layer in EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite. (magnification 101x).	111
Figure 4.39:	Impact fracture image of GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite.	112
Figure 4.40:	SEM micrograph of oil palm fiber fracture surface in GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite. (magnification 101x).	112
Figure 4.41:	Effect of stacking sequence on the water absorption properties of the hybrid composites.	113
Figure 4.42:	(a) Image of GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite before exposure to fire. (b) Image of GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite after exposed to fire. (c) Image of EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite before exposed to fire. (d) Image of EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite after exposed to fire.	115
Figure 4.43:	Schematic diagram of woven fiber mat and oil palm fiber mat stacked together during molding. Dashed arrows indicate gaps between the interlayer of the woven fabric mat and also at the interlayer between the woven mat and oil palm fiber mat.	119
Figure 4.44:	Effect of fiber architecture on the impact strength of EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites.	120
Figure 4.45:	Impact fracture image of woven fabric reinforced EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite.	123
Figure 4.46:	Impact fracture image of woven fabric reinforced GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite	123
Figure 4.47:	Effect of fiber architecture on the flexural strength of the EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites	124
Figure 4.48:	Cross section image of woven fabric reinforced GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite.	127
Figure 4.49:	Flexural fracture image of GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite.	127
Figure 4.50:	Effect of fiber architecture on the flexural modulus of EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites.	128
Figure 4.51:	Effect of fiber architecture on the water absorption properties of EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites.	130

Figure 4.52: (a) Image of woven fabric reinforced GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite before exposed to fire. (b) Image of woven fabric reinforced GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite after exposed to fire. (c) Image of woven fabric reinforced EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite before exposed to fire. (d) Image of woven fabric reinforced EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite after exposed to fire. 132

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Acrylonitrile-Butadiene Styrene
PBT	Poly(Para Phenylene Benzobisimidazole)
PEEK	Polyetheretherketone
PEK	Polyetherketone
PPS	Polyphenylenesulphide
EFB	Empty fruit bunch
GF	Glass Fiber
CSM	Chopped strand mat

## LIST OF APPENDICES

	Page
Appendix A: Determination of an optimum ratio of the polyamide hardener in the epoxy/polyamide/benzyl alcohol system.	149
Appendix B: Typical physical and mechanical properties of the epoxy/polyamide/benzyl alcohol system.	151
Appendix C: Oil palm fiber mat moisture analysis calculation.	152
Appendix D: Comparison between the experimentally calculated values of tensile strength, elongation at break, Young's Modulus, impact strength, flexural strength and flexural modulus with theoretically calculated values from the rule of mixture equation.	153

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Paper 1 (Abstract):	Effect of Hardener Loading on The Flexural Properties and Glass Transition Temperature Of Epoxy Resin, <i>Post Graduate Research Papers, 2001/2002, School of Materials and Mineral Resources Engineering, University Sains Malaysia.</i>	156
Paper 2 (Abstract):	Agro-Hybrid Composites: Combination of Oil Palm Fibres and Glass Fibres As Reinforced in Polyester Composites, <i>Proceedings of the Regional Symposium on Chemical Engineering (RSCE) and 16<sup>th</sup> Symposium of Malaysian Chemical Engineers (SOMCHE), 2002.</i>	157
Paper 3 (Abstract):	Mechanical Properties of Oil Palm Empty Fruit Bunch Fiber/Glass Fiber Hybrid Bi-Layer Laminate Composite, <i>Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Recent Advances in Materials and Environment, 2003.</i>	158
Paper 4 (Abstract):	Influence of Oil Palm Fiber Loading on The Mechanical and Physical Properties of Glass Fiber Reinforced Epoxy Bi-Layer Hybrid Laminate Composite, <i>Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> USM-JIRCAS Joint International Symposium, 2004.</i>	159
Paper 5 (Abstract):	Mechanical and Physical Properties of Natural Fiber/Glass Fiber Hybrid Composites, <i>Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Materials Technology Conference and Exhibition (IMTCE), 2004.</i>	160

Paper 6	Lignocellulose Based Hybrid Bi-Layer Laminate Composite: Part 1.	161
(Abstract):	Studies on Tensile and Impact Behavior of Oil Palm Fiber/Glass Fiber Reinforced Epoxy Resin, <i>Journal Of Composite Materials</i> , 2004 ( <i>in Press</i> )	



**KOMPOSIT LAMINAT HYBRID BERASASKAN LIGNOSELULOSA: SIFAT-  
SIFAT FIZIKAL, MEKANIKAL DAN KEBOLEHBAKARAN KOMPOSIT  
GENTIAN KELAPA SAWIT/GENTIAN KACA DIPERKUATKAN RESIN  
EPOKSIDA.**

**ABSTRAK**

Dalam kajian ini, sifat-sifat mekanikal, fizikal dan kebolehbakaran komposit laminat hibrid berasaskan lignoselulosa telah di kaji. Daripada kajian tersebut telah diperhatikan bahawa penambahan gentian kaca dalam komposit gentian kelapa sawit telah meningkatkan sifat-sifat tensil, hentaman dan fleksural komposit tersebut. Kesan hibrid negatif yang telah diperhatikan untuk kekuatan tensil, modulus Young, kekuatan fleksural dan modulus fleksural adalah disebabkan oleh struktur laminasi hibrid komposit. Walau bagaimana pun, kesan positif hibrid telah diperhatikan untuk pemanjangan dan kekuatan hentaman hibrid komposit berasaskan lignoselulosa. Kekuatan hentaman komposit lignoselulosa yang dihentam pada lapisan gentian kaca adalah lebih tinggi daripada komposit yang dihentam pada lapisan gentian kelapa sawit. Walau bagaimana pun, kekuatan fleksural yang tinggi telah dipamerkan oleh komposit hibrid lignoselulosa apabila beban dikenakan pada lapisan gentian kelapa sawit. Di samping itu, penambahan gentian kaca telah pun mengurangkan kandungan rongga, sifat-sifat penyerapan air dan mengurangkan kebolehbakaran komposit berasaskan lignoselulosa.

Kesan penyusunan lapisan terhadap sifat-sifat mekanikal, fizikal dan keupayaan terbakar komposit laminat hibrid berasaskan lignoselulosa telah di kaji dan dibandingkan dengan komposit hibrid dua lapisan EFB/GF. Komposit hibrid EFB/GF/EFB dan GF/EFB/GF telah mengandungi kandungan rongga yang kurang berbanding komposit dua

lapisan EFB/GF. Kekuatan fleksural dan modulus fleksural komposit hibrid GF/EFB/GF adalah lebih tinggi daripada komposit hibrid dua lapisan EFB/GF. Modulus fleksural komposit GF/EFB/GF juga adalah jauh lebih tinggi daripada modulus fleksural komposit gentian kaca. Disamping itu, kekuatan hentaman komposit EFB/GF/EFB adalah lebih tinggi daripada komposit dua lapisan EFB/GF. Selain itu, komposit hibrid EFB/GF/EFB dan GF/EFB/GF telah mempamerkan kekuatan hentaman yang lebih tinggi dari komposit dua lapisan EFB/GF. Akan tetapi, kesan penyusunan lapisan didapati tidak mempengaruhi kebolehbakaran komposit hibrid lignoselulosa.

Komposit hibrid EFB/GF/EFB dan GF/EFB/GF telah diperkuatkan dengan gentian kaca teranyam dihasilkan dan sifat-sifat mekanikal, fizikal dan kebolehbakaran komposit tersebut dibandingkan dengan hibrid komposit yang diperkuatkan tikar gentian kaca terpotong (chopped strand mat). Didapati bahawa komposit hibrid diperkuatkan gentian kaca teranyam mempunyai kekuatan hentaman dan kebolehbakaran yang rendah berbanding hibrid komposit diperkuatkan gentian kaca terpotong. Tiada peningkatan yang ketara diperhatikan pada kekuatan fleksural dan modulus fleksural bagi komposit hibrid diperkuatkan gentian teranyam. Walau bagaimanapun, kandungan rongga yang tinggi dalam komposit hibrid teranyam mengakibatkan keupayaan penyerapan airnya lebih tinggi berbanding komposit hibrid diperkuatkan gentian kaca terpotong.

## **ABSTRACT**

The mechanical, physical and flammability properties of the lignocellulose hybrid laminate composites were studied in this research. It was observed that the addition of glass fibers into the oil palm fiber composite enhanced the tensile, flexural and impact properties of the lignocellulose composites. Owing to the interlaminated structure of the composite, a negative hybrid effect was observed for the tensile strength, Young's modulus, flexural strength and flexural modulus. However, a positive hybrid effect was observed for the elongation at break and the impact strength of the lignocellulose hybrid laminate composites. The lignocellulose hybrid laminate composites, which were impacted at the glass fiber layer exhibited higher impact strength than when impacted at the oil palm fiber layer. On the other hand, the hybrid composites exhibited higher flexural strength when loaded at the oil palm fiber layer. Furthermore, the hybridization of the oil palm fiber composite with glass fibers reduced the void content, the water absorption properties and enhanced the flammability properties of the lignocellulose composite.

The effect of stacking sequence on the mechanical, physical and flammability properties of the lignocellulose hybrid laminate composites were studied and was compared with the EFB/GF hybrid bi-layer laminate composite. The stacking sequence of EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites reduced the void content of the hybrid composite compared to the EFB/GF bi-layer laminate composite. The GF/EFB/GF hybrid composite exhibited an enhanced flexural strength and modulus as compared to the bi-layer laminate composite. The flexural modulus though was higher than the glass fiber composite. The impact strength of the EFB/GF/EFB hybrid composite was higher than the EFB/GF hybrid composite. Besides that, the EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites exhibited improved water absorption properties compared to the EFB/GF

hybrid bi-layer laminate composite. However the effect of stacking sequence did not seem to have contributed to the flammability properties of the lignocellulose hybrid laminate composites.

The EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites were reinforced with a plain weave glass fabric and the mechanical, physical and flammability properties of the hybrid composites were compared with the chopped strand mat reinforced hybrid composites. The woven fabric reinforced hybrid composites exhibited enhanced impact strength and improved flammability properties compared to the chopped strand mat hybrid composites. Significant improvement in the flexural properties were not observed in the woven fabric reinforced hybrid composites. The high void content of the woven fabric reinforced hybrid composites resulted in an increase in the water absorption behavior of the composites compared to the chopped strand mat reinforced hybrid composites.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Lignocellulose Fiber Composites: Overview

In recent years, owing to the increased environmental awareness, the usage of lignocellulosic fibers as a potential replacement for synthetic fibers such as carbon, aramid and glass fibers in composite materials have gained interest among researchers throughout the world. Extensive studies which have been done on lignocellulosic fibers such as sisal (Joseph *et al.*, 1996 and Oksman *et al.*, 2002), jute (Pal *et al.*, 1984, 1988 and Albuquerque *et al.*, 2000), pineapple (George *et al.*, 1998; Devi *et al.*, 1997 and Mishra *et al.*, 2001), banana (Pothan *et al.*, 1997 and Joseph *et al.*, 2002) and oil palm empty fruit bunch fibers (Rozman *et al.*, 1998; Hill *et al.*, 2000 and Abdul Khalil *et al.*, 2001) have shown that lignocellulosic fibers have the potential to be an effective reinforcement in thermoplastics and thermosetting materials.

According to Bledzki *et al.* (1999), Wambua *et al.* (2003) and Mishra *et al.* (2000), lignocellulose fibers offer several advantages over their synthetic fiber counterparts. Lignocellulose fibers are abundant in nature, renewable raw material and a low cost material. Owing to their low specific gravity, which is about 1.25-1.50 g/cm<sup>3</sup> compared to synthetic fibers, especially glass fibers which is about 2.6 g/cm<sup>3</sup>, lignocellulose fibers are able to provide a high strength to weight ratio in plastic materials. The usage of lignocellulose fibers also provides a healthier working condition than the synthetic fibers. This is due to the fact that, the glass fiber dust from the trimming and mounting of glass fiber components causes skin irritation and respiratory diseases among workers. Besides that, the less abrasive nature of the lignocellulose fibers offers a friendlier processing

environment as the wear of tools could be reduced. Furthermore, lignocellulose fibers offer good thermal and insulating properties, easily recyclable and are biodegradable especially when used as reinforcement in a biopolymer matrix.

These advantages have gained interest in the automotive industry where materials of lightweight, high strength to weight ratio and minimum environmental impact are required. Automotive giants such as DaimlerChrysler are using flax/sisal fiber mat embedded in an epoxy matrix for the door panels of the Mercedes Benz E-class model (Gayer and Thomas, 1996). Coconut fibers bonded with natural rubber latex are being used for seat cushions in the Mercedes Benz A-Class model (Deem, 2003). Cambridge Industry (an automotive industry in Michigan, USA) is making flax fiber reinforced polypropylene for Freightliner Century COE C-2 heavy trucks and also rear shelf trim panels of the 2000 model Chevrolet Impala (Sherman, 2003). Besides the automotive industry, lignocellulosic fiber composites such as jute fiber reinforced polyester have also found application in the building and construction industries such as panels, ceilings and partition board.

However, lignocellulose fiber composite products are still limited to the interior of cars that are not exposed to strong mechanical impacts and non-structural components compared to synthetic fiber composites which are used widely in high performance engineering applications such as in the aerospace industry. This is because lignocellulosic fiber composites have low strength properties, poor moisture resistance, poor microbial and fire resistance and low durability properties.

Therefore, through hybridization of the lignocellulosic fibers with a stronger and more corrosion resistant synthetic fiber such as glass fibers, the strength, stiffness, moisture and fire resistant behavior of the lignocellulosic composite can be improved significantly.

## **1.2 Objectives of The Research**

Hybridization (intermingled system) of lignocellulose fibers with glass fibers have been studied extensively by researchers throughout the world. However, in this study a different type of lignocellulose based hybrid composite which is an intraply or interlaminated hybrid composite was produced. Studies on lignocellulose based hybrid laminate (interply) composite are still new and not much research has been published. Therefore, an attempt was undertaken by our research group to understand the mechanical and physical properties of a lignocellulose based hybrid laminate composite. The main objectives of this research are summarized below:

- 1) To study and understand the effect of glass fiber loading on the mechanical, physical and flammability properties of oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid bi-layer laminate composites.
- 2) To study the effect of stacking sequence on the mechanical, physical and flammability properties of the oil palm fiber/glass fiber hybrid laminate composites. The mechanical physical and flammability properties of the EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites were compared with the EFB/GF bi-layer hybrid composite.
- 3) To study the effect of woven glass fiber fabric as a reinforcement in EFB/GF/EFB and GF/EFB/GF hybrid composites.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Composite Materials.**

In the new millennium, composite materials are considered as a new and important class of engineering materials.

The earliest example of a composite material can be traced back in the third millennium BC when Egyptians made bricks from clay reinforced with straw (Astrom, 1977 and Matthews *et al.*, 1999). The Mongolians though produced bows which were made from a combination of wood, animal tendons and silk.

Composite materials can be divided into natural occurring composite and synthetic composites. Many natural occurring materials are classified as composite materials. Examples of natural composites are wood which is made up of cellulose molecules in a lignin matrix, teeth and bone which are composed of hydroxyapatite in a matrix of collagen, insect exoskeleton to name a few. Examples of synthetic composites are concrete (combination of stone and cement), asphalt and also glass fiber reinforced unsaturated polyester matrix.

##### **2.1.2 Definition of Composite**

Nowadays, composite materials are used in a wide variety of applications. According to Astrom (1997), the noun composite is derived from the Latin verb *componere* which means to put together. Therefore, a composite material can be considered as a material which is formed when two or more chemically distinct constituents are combined together on a macro scale (Astrom, 1977; Schwartz, 1992 and Jordan, 2002). Schwartz



(1992) further stressed that the constituents in a composite material can be physically identified and exhibit an interface between one another. A more detailed description of a composite material was given by Agarwal *et al.* (1981) who defined a composite as a material that consists of one or more discontinuous phases which are usually hard and strong embedded in a continuous phase. The continuous phase is called the matrix while the discontinuous phase is termed the reinforcement material.

### **2.1.3 Classifications of Composite Materials**

Based on the definition of a composite material, composites can be produced by any combination of two or more materials which can be metallic, organic or inorganic. Schwartz (1992) cited that the most widely used constituent forms in a composite material are fibers, particles, laminae or layers, flakes, fillers and matrixes.

Generally, composite materials are classified based on the morphology of reinforcement and also on the matrix material. Classifications of composite materials according to the reinforcement forms are particulate reinforced composites, fiber reinforced composites and structural composites. Particles by definition are non-fibrous in nature and have roughly equal dimensions. Common shapes of particles used as reinforcements in composites are spherical, cubical, tetragonal, platelet or of other regular or irregular shapes (Agarwal, 1981 and Mariatti, 1998). Fiber reinforced composites are composed of reinforcing fibers which are characterized as a long fine filament with an aspect ratio of greater than 10. Glass, carbon, aramid, boron and cellulose fibers are widely used as reinforcement in composite materials. Structural composites though, consist of laminate and sandwich composites, which are used in structural engineering applications.

In addition, classification of composite materials based on the type of the matrix can be grouped into there main categories such as metal matrix composites (MMC), polymer matrix composites (PMC) and ceramic matrix composites (CMC) (Schwartz, 1992; Hull *et al.*, 1996 and Reinhart, 1987). According to Hull *et al.* (1996) most composites in industrial use are based on polymeric matrices. The focus of this research is mainly on polymer matrix composite.

## **2.2 Fiber Reinforced Plastic Composites**

Fiber reinforced plastic composites or commonly known as FRP are now competing with traditional materials such as steel, wood, aluminum, and concrete in various engineering applications. Fiber reinforced plastics composites have found applications in automobiles, boats, aircrafts and as construction materials. This is because unlike the conventional materials mentioned above, fiber reinforced plastic composites have excellent specific mechanical properties (high strength to weight ratio), corrosion resistance and are low cost. The properties of a fiber reinforced plastic composites are mainly governed by the fiber, matrix and interface. Thus, the following chapter would deal in detail with the functions and characteristics of these components.

### **2.2.1 Matrices**

Matrix can be easily defined as a material where the reinforcing system of a composite is embedded. The matrix serves as a binder which holds the reinforcing materials in its place. Besides that, when a composite is subjected to an applied load, the matrix deforms and transfers the external load uniformly to the fibers (Astrom, 1977; Mariatti, 1998). The matrix also provides resistance to crack propagation and damage tolerance

owing to the plastic flow at crack tips (Shwartz, 1992). Furthermore, the matrix also functions to protect the surface of fibers from adverse environmental effects and abrasion especially during composite processing.

Plastic matrices can generally be classified into two major types which are thermoplastics and thermosets. The selection criteria of the matrices depend solely on the composite end use requirements. For example, if chemical resistance together with elevated temperature resistance is needed for a composite material then thermoset matrices are preferred than thermoplastics. Whereas, if a composite material with high damage tolerance and recyclability is needed then thermoplastics are preferred.

#### **2.2.1.1 Thermoset**

Thermoset resins are usually liquids or low melting point solids in their initial form. This liquid resin is then converted to a hard rigid solid by chemical cross-linking through a curing process which involves the application of heat and the addition of curing agents or hardeners. Once cured, a tightly bound three dimensional network structure is formed in the resin and hence the resin cannot be melted, reshaped and reprocessed by heating (Hull *et al.*, 1996 and Matthews *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, during composite manufacturing, the impregnation process followed by the shaping and solidification should be done before the resin begins to cure (Mariatti, 1998). Thermoset resins are brittle at room temperature and have low fracture toughness. On the other hand, owing to its three dimensional cross linked structure, thermoset resins have high thermal stability, chemical resistance, high dimensional stability and also high creep properties (Matthews *et al.*, 1999 and Shwartz, 1992).

Among the most common thermosetting resins used in composite manufacturing are unsaturated polyesters, epoxies, vinyl esters and phenolics. In this research, epoxy resin was preferred over unsaturated polyester resins which are used widely in composite industries. This is because epoxy resins exhibit better structural characteristics such as high stiffness and strength properties and have also excellent water and chemical resistance, good thermal stability, good adhesion to a substrate and low shrinkage during cure (Matthews *et al.*, 1999; Hull *et al.*, 1996; Dominick, 1997 and Schwartz, 1992).

#### **2.2.1.2 Thermoplastic**

Thermoplastic resins are linear or branched polymers which remain as a solid at room temperature. Unlike thermosets, thermoplastics do not form a three dimensional cross linking network. The monomer units in the thermoplastic are held by a weak Van der Waals's forces which are easily broken by heat and stress (Dominick, 1997). As a result, thermoplastics are able to melt when heated and becomes a solid when cooled to room temperature.

Thermoplastics can be classified into two classes which are commodity plastics and engineering plastics. Commodity plastics such as polyolefins, styrenics, acrylics and vinyls possess moderate mechanical and thermal properties. Thus, they are normally used in applications with less service requirements. Engineering plastics though are able to perform at elevated temperatures and under high load bearing. Examples of engineering plastics are ABS, PBT, Nylon, PEEK, PEK and PPS. The costs of engineering plastics are much higher than the commodity plastics.

Thermoplastic resins offer several advantages over their thermoset resin counterpart. Thermoplastic products can be recycled owing to the nature of the

thermoplastics which can be repeatedly heated and shaped (Ruzaidi, 1999 and Matthews *et al.*, 1999). In addition, thermoplastics offer improved fracture toughness and low moisture absorption behavior. The processing time of thermoplastics is shorter than most thermosets as the processing of thermoplastics only involve melting, shaping and cooling which can be achieved in a matter of few seconds whereas thermosets would take several hours to days to fully crosslink (Astrom, 1977 and Leong, 2003). Moreover, imperfect thermoplastic products can be reprocessed and flash or unused thermoplastics can be used for other applications.

However, unlike thermoset resins, thermoplastics have low thermal and chemical resistance. Therefore, thermoset resins mainly dominate as matrices in structural composite applications. Table 2.1 summarizes some typical properties of thermoset and thermoplastic resins.

**Table 2.1:** Some typical properties of thermoset and thermoplastic resins

	<b>Epoxy</b>	<b>Polyester</b>	<b>Nylon (6.6)</b>	<b>Polypropylene</b>
<b>Density (g/cm<sup>3</sup>)</b>	1.1-1.4	1.1-1.5	1.1	0.9
<b>Tensile Strength (MPa)</b>	35-90	45-85	60-70	25-38
<b>Young's Modulus (GPa)</b>	2.1-6.0	1.3-4.5	1.4-2.8	1.9-1.4
<b>Strain at break (%)</b>	1-6	2	40-80	300

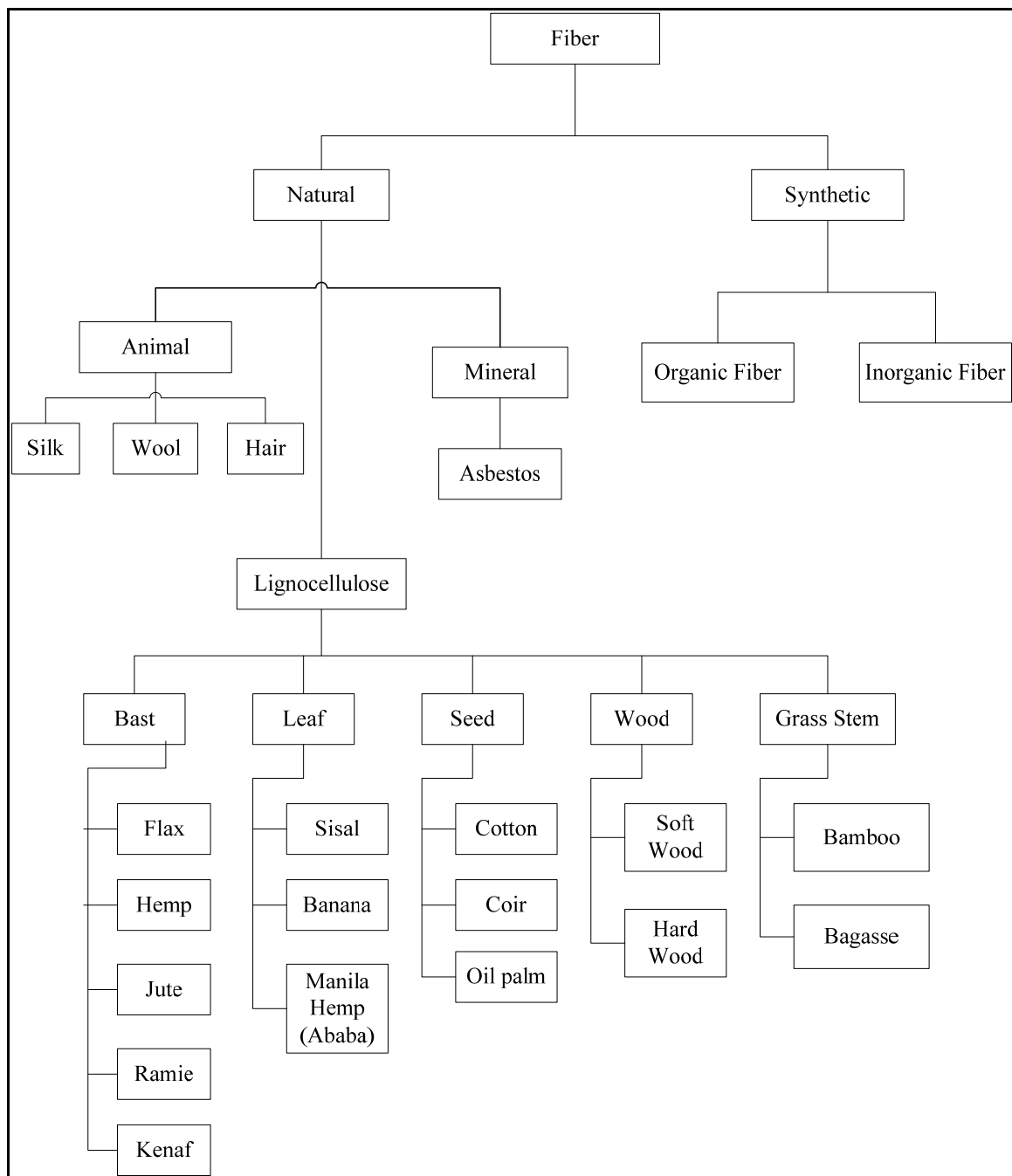
### **2.2.2 Fiber Reinforcement**

Reinforcement is the disperse phase in a composite material and its primary function is to carry the structural load subjected on the composite. Dominick, (1997) added that besides carrying the structural load, reinforcements also function to increase the strength and stiffness to density ratio of a composite, increase the resistance to corrosion, fatigue, creep, stress rupture and reduce the coefficient of thermal expansion of composite materials. Furthermore, fibers are able to retard the propagation of cracks and hence increasing the toughness of the composite material.

Based on previous literatures, it is noted that reinforcing fibers can be classified according to their origin, length, physical structure and chemical structure (Dominick, 1997; Lilholt and Lawther, 2002 and Fried, 1995). For the sake of simplicity and better understanding, classification of fibers according to their origin is adopted in this study. As shown in Figure 2.1, reinforcing fibers can be classified into natural fibers and synthetic fibers. Natural fibers which are obtained from natural resources include animal fibers, lignocellulose fibers and mineral fibers. Lignocellulose fibers will be discussed in detail in the following section (refer to section 2.4). Silk, wool and hair are examples of animal fibers which are basically made up of protein and keratin (Fried, 1995). Asbestos which is a fibrous mineral found in rocks, is the most widely used mineral fiber in composite materials. This is because asbestos fibers are low cost and have also superior strength and modulus. However since asbestos fibers are hazardous to the health, the usage of asbestos in composites have been significantly reduced (Dominick, 1997).

Synthetic fibers are man made fibers which can be further categorized as organic fibers and inorganic fibers. Organic fibers include aramid (eg. Kevlar), polyethylene (eg. Spectra and Dyneema), polypropylene, polyester and polyacrylonitrile. Glass, carbon,

alumina and boron are examples of inorganic fibers which are more established in composite materials than organic fibers.



**Figure 2.1:** Classifications of fibers (Lilholt and Lawther, 2002)

Glass fibers are extensively used as reinforcements in plastic materials and according to Dominick (1997), glass fibers represent about 90 wt.% consumption of all reinforced fibers used in plastic materials world wide. The major ingredient of glass fibers is silica ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ). Glass fibers have good mechanical properties such as high strength and good impact properties, chemical resistance, good electrical and thermal insulating properties and the cost of production is low compared to other synthetic fibers (Astrom, 1977; Fried, 1995 and Matthews *et al.*, 1999). There are several different types of glass fibers available in the market and the most common ones are the E, A, S, and C glass fibers. The “E” glass fibers are the general purpose grade glass fibers and have excellent electrical and durability properties. The “S” glass fibers offer high strength and modulus and heat resistance. The “C” type of glass fibers though, exhibit high chemical resistance while the “A” glass fibers exhibit high alkali resistance. Therefore, the selection of the type of glass fibers needed is mainly dependent on the end use of the composite material.

#### **2.2.2.1 Reinforcement Forms**

Fiber reinforcements are available in a variety of forms to serve a wide range of processes and end product requirements. Reinforcement forms include rovings, chopped strands, mats and fabrics. The characteristics of the reinforcement forms are discussed below:

##### **(a) Rovings**

Rovings consist of many individual continuous fiber strands wound into a spool. Fiber rovings are mainly used in continuous composite molding processes such as filament winding and pultrusion. Prepregs can also be formed by impregnating the rovings with a polymeric resin (Mallick, 1988; Jones, 1994 and Norwood, 1994).



#### (b) Chopped strands

Chopped strands or also known as chopped fibers are produced by cutting the continuous fiber rovings into shorter lengths. The fiber length ranges from 3.2 to 12.7mm. Chopped strands are used in injection molding process.

#### (c) Mats

Fiber mats which are known as non-woven fabrics are the most commonly used fiber form in composite manufacturing. Chopped strand mat and continuous strand mat are two distinct forms of fiber mats. Chopped strand mats (CSM) are produced by dispersing uniformly chopped fibers with an average length of about 25mm together with a polymeric binder onto a thin film. These mats provide equal strength in all directions and is used primarily for hand-lay up processing (Mallick, 1988 and Astrom, 1977). Continuous strand mats though, are formed by swirling continuous fiber strands in a moving film and then applying a polymeric binder to hold the mat together. Continuous strand mats are now finding usage in resin transfer molding (RTM) and matched die-molding (Norwood, 1994).

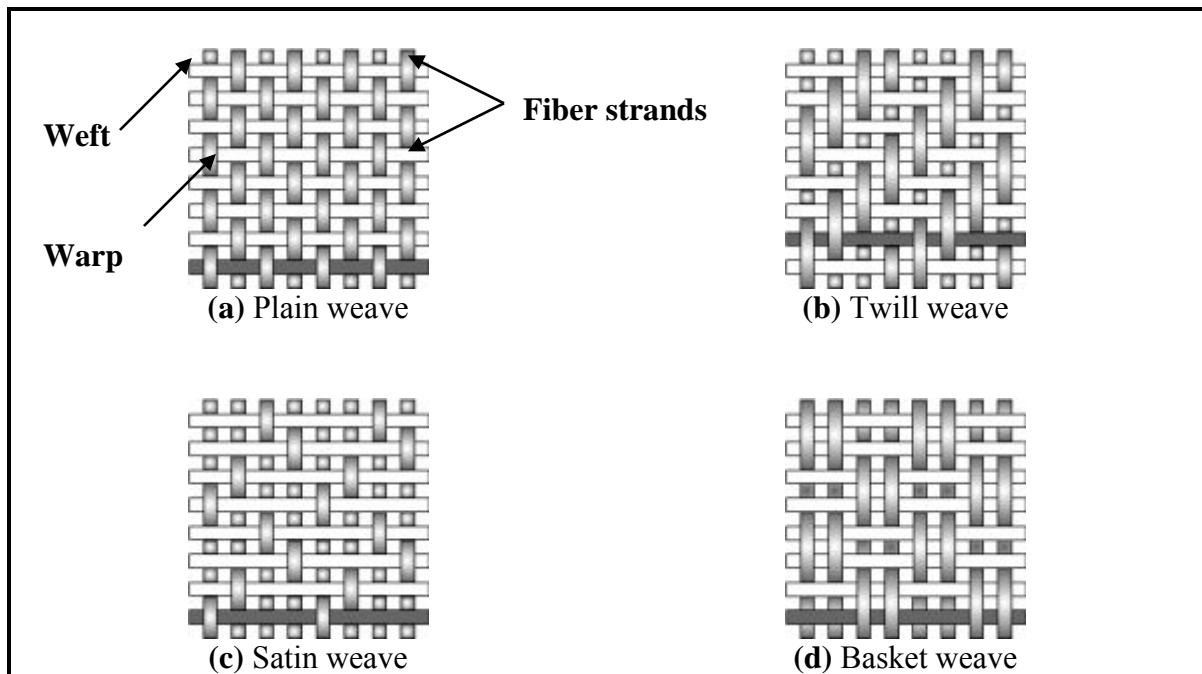
#### (d) Fabrics

Fabrics are made up of long continuous fibers which are oriented along two perpendicular directions (Gay, 2003). These fibers are held together by mechanical interlocking of the fiber themselves or by a polymeric binder. Fabrics exist in many different forms such as woven fabrics, unidirectional fabrics, hybrid fabrics, braided fabrics and knitted fabrics. However, in this study the nature and properties of woven fabrics would be discussed.

Woven fabrics are formed by interlacing two or more fiber strands in the warp (longitudinal) and weft (transverse) directions in a weave style (Astrom, 1977, Mariatti, 1998). Woven fabrics provide enhanced mechanical properties in the  $0^0$  and  $90^0$  directions.

The weave style in a woven fabric influences the formability, surface smoothness and fabric stability. The commonly used woven fabric weave styles are plain weave, twill weave, satin weave and basket weave (refer to Figure 2.2). Among these weave styles, plain weave fabric is widely used in general composite applications owing to its easy handling characteristics.

On the whole, the selection of a fiber form is mainly dependent on the type of composite processing and also on the end use of the composite product



**Figure 2.2:** Schematic diagram of different woven fabric styles

### 2.2.3 Fiber Matrix Interface

Besides the properties fiber and matrix, the fiber-matrix interface which results from the interaction of the matrix and the surface of the reinforcing fibers, plays an important role in determining the properties of a composite material. According to Chawla (1987), the interface consists of surface layers of fiber and matrix and any layers of material existing

between these surfaces. He also explained that the internal surface area occupied by the interface in a composite containing a reasonable fiber volume fraction is quite extensive which is about  $3000 \text{ cm}^2/\text{cm}^3$ .

The main function of an interface is to transfer effectively the applied load on the composite from the matrix to the fibers. The interface also protects the fiber surface from environmental degradation (Chawla, 1987; Astrom, 1977, Mariatti, 1998). The ability of the interface to act effectively as a load transferring medium between the matrix and fibers is dependent on the fiber-matrix interfacial bonding or adhesion. A strong interfacial adhesion would enhance the interlaminar shear strength, delamination resistance, fatigue properties and corrosion resistance of a composite (Astrom, 1977). However, strong interfacial adhesion would result in low damage tolerance properties of the composite material. The adhesion between the fiber and matrix occurs through various mechanisms such as chemical adhesion, mechanical adhesion, interdiffusion and electrostatic attraction (Astrom, 1977; Chawla, 1987 and Mariatti, 1998). Therefore, by understanding these fiber-matrix adhesion mechanism, the degree of adhesion between the fiber and matrix could be controlled in order to obtain the desired properties in a composite material.

### **2.3 Lignocellulose Fiber Composite**

Among the natural fibers mentioned in the earlier section, lignocellulose fibers are used widely in fiber reinforced plastic composites. Lignocellulose fibers are derived from plants and their main chemical component is cellulose.

### **2.3.1 Classification of Lignocellulose Fibers**

As seen in Figure 2.1, lignocellulose fibers can be classed according to the their source in plants such as bast fibers, leaf fibers, seed fibers, wood fibers and grass stem fibers (Rowell, 1995; McGovern, 1987 and Lilholt and Lawther, 2002).

Bast fibers or also known as stem fibers are from the inner bark of the plant stem and extend along the length of the stem. These fibrous strands serve to strengthen the stem of plants. Bast fibers are multicelled in structure which consist of a number of single fibers bundled together. Examples of bast fibers are jute, flax, hemp, kenaf and ramie (McGovern, 1987 and Lilholt and Lawther, 2002).

Leaf fibers include sisal, henequen, abaca, pineapple, banana and Manila hemp. Leaf fibers extend longitudinally of the length of the leaf and contribute to the strength of the leaf. Leaf fibers are also multicelled fibers similar to bast fibers.

Seed fibers such as cotton, coir, oil palm and kapok are obtained from the fruits of the plants. Among the seed fibers, cotton is the most famous fiber and is used in the textile industry all over the world. According to McGovern (1987), all seed fibers are single celled fibers. However in a recent work, Rozman *et al.* (2001) concluded that oil palm fibers do exist as fiber bundles.

Wood fibers are found from the bark of a tree. Wood fibers can be divided into hardwood fibers which are from hardwood trees and softwood fibers which are from softwood trees. Wood fibers are singled cell fibers and are short fibers compared to the long bast and leaf fibers (Lilholt and Lawther, 2002).

Grass fibers include bamboo, bagasse, cereal straw and reed canary grass. The most widely used grass fibers as reinforcement in a composite material are the bamboo fibers. Most grass fibers are short fibers similar to wood fibers (Moran, 2003).

### 2.3.2 Chemical Composition of Lignocellulose Fibers

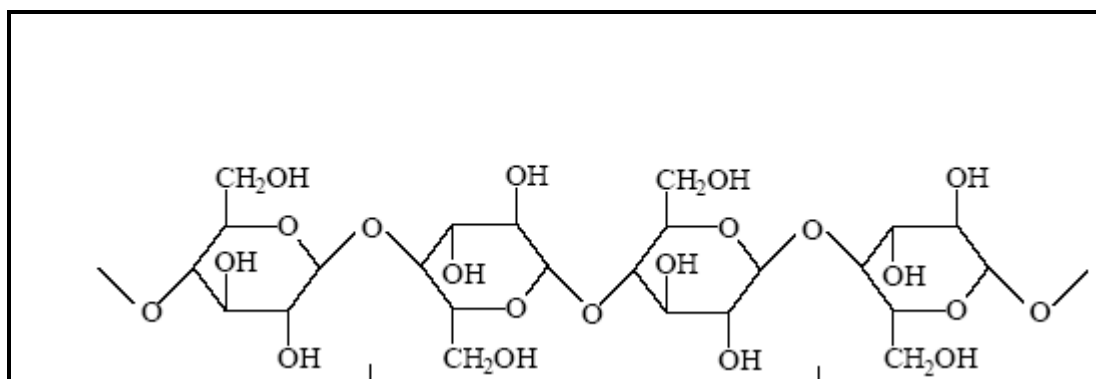
The basic chemical components of a lignocellulose fiber are cellulose, hemi-cellulose, lignin and pectin. Pectin is usually not found in wood tissues because the secondary wall thickening replaces almost all of the pectin with lignin (Lilholt and Lawther, 2002). Waxes and water soluble substances are also found in small amounts in the cell wall of a lignocellulose fiber. The chemical compositions of a lignocellulose fiber vary according to the species, growing conditions, method of fiber preparations and many other factors (Bledzki *et al.*, 1999). Chemical compositions of lignocellulose fibers are shown in Table 2.2

Table 2.2: Chemical composition of some common lignocellulose fibers (Bledzki *et al.*, 1999; Sreekala *et al.*, 1997)

<b>Fibers</b>	<b>Cellulose(%)</b>	<b>Hemicellulose(%)</b>	<b>Lignin(%)</b>	<b>Pectin(%)</b>
<b>Oil palm empty fruit bunch fiber(EFB)</b>	19	-	19	2
<b>Coir</b>	32-43	0.15-0.25	40-45	-
<b>Banana</b>	63-64	19	5	-
<b>Sisal</b>	66-72	12	10-14	0.8
<b>Jute</b>	64.4	12	11.8	4-10
<b>Pineapple</b>	81.5	-	12.7	
<b>Flax</b>	71.2	18.6	2.2	5-12

### 2.3.2.1 Cellulose

Cellulose is the main component in lignocellulose fibers and is the reinforcing material within the cell wall. Cellulose is a linear crystalline condensation polymer consisting of D-anhydroglucopyranose units held together by  $\beta$ -1,4-glycosidic bonds (see Figure 2.3). Cellulose is a high molecular weight homopolymer of glucose and it is laid down in microfibrils where extensive hydrogen bonding between the cellulose chains produces a strong crystalline structure (Lilholt and Lawther 2002). According to Bledzki *et al.* (1999) and Daniel (1985), cellulose can be characterized as cellulose I, cellulose II, cellulose III and cellulose IV based upon their physical crystal structure. Furthermore, the mechanical properties of lignocellulose fibers depend on the type of cellulose whether it is cellulose I or cellulose II because each type of cellulose has its own geometrical conditions, which influences the mechanical properties.



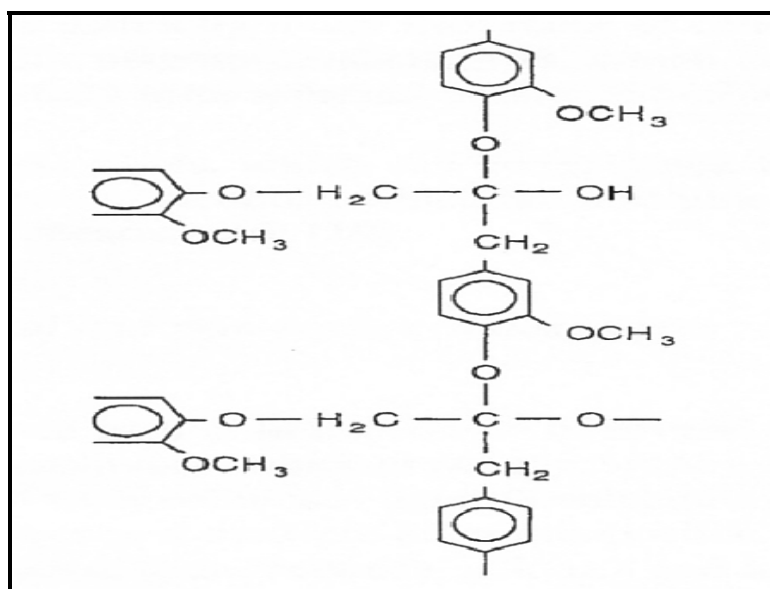
**Figure 2.3** Molecular structure of cellulose

### 2.3.2.2 Hemicellulose

Hemicellulose is not a form of cellulose and is a copolymer of a group of polysaccharides consisting of glucose, mannose, xylose, galactose and arabinose. Unlike cellulose, hemicellulose is of low molecular weight, amorphous and exhibits chain branching. Owing to its amorphous morphology, hemicellulose is partially soluble in water. Besides that, the constituents of hemicellulose vary from plant to plant (Nevell, 1985).

### 2.3.2.3 Lignin

Lignin, which is generally regarded as an adhesive in the cell wall, is a hydrocarbon polymer consisting of aliphatic and aromatic components (Nevell, 1985 and Bledzki *et al.*, 1999). The structure of lignin is shown in Figure (2.4). Lignin has a disordered structure and is formed through ring opening polymerization of phenyl propane monomers. Lignin also provides rigidity, hydrophobicity and decay resistance to the cell wall of lignocellulose fibers.



**Figure 2.4:** Molecular structure of lignin

#### **2.3.2.4 Pectin**

Pectin is a polysaccharide consisting polygalacturon acid. Lilholt and Lawther (2002), cited that pectin is the major matrix component within the cell wall of lignocellulose fibers especially in non-wood fibers.

#### **2.3.2.5 Waxes**

Waxes consist of different type of alcohols which are insoluble in water and also in certain acids such as palmitic acid, oleaginous acid and stearic acid. They can only be extracted from the fibers by using organic solvents.

### **2.3.3 Physical and Mechanical Properties of Lignocellulose Fibers**

The diameter of lignocellulose fibers normally varies in the range of  $0.015 \times 10^4$  to  $0.05 \times 10^4 \mu\text{m}$ . The densities of lignocellulose fibers are in the range of 1.25 to 1.55 g/cm<sup>3</sup>. The mechanical properties of lignocellulose fibers are summarized in Table 2.5. Based from the Table it could be observed that bast and leaf fibers are the strongest among the lignocellulose fibers with a high tensile strength and modulus of elasticity. However, owing to their low extensibility, bast and leaf fibers have poor toughness properties compared to seed fibers such as oil palm fiber and coir fibers. According to Sreekala *et al.* (1997) and Bledzki *et al.* (1999), the mechanical properties of lignocellulose fibers depend on the fibrillar structure, spiral angle of the micro-fibrils and the cellulose content.

The relationship between the strength of the lignocellulose fibers with the microfibrillar angle and cellulose content is given by equation 2.1

$$\sigma = -334.005 - 2.830\theta + 12.22W \quad (2.1)$$



where  $\sigma$  is the fiber strength,  $\theta$  is the microfibrillar angle and  $W$  is the cellulose content. Furthermore, the elongation at break  $\varepsilon$  can be correlated with the microfibrillar angle  $\theta$  based on equation 2.2 below :

$$\varepsilon = -2.78 + 7.28 \times 10^{-2} \theta + 7.7 \times 10^{-3} \theta \quad (2.2)$$

**Table 2.3:** Mechanical and physical properties of lignocellulose fibers and synthetic fibers (Sreekala *et al.*, 1997; Bledzki *et al.*, 1999 and Lilholt and Lawther, 2002)

Fibers	Density	Stiffness(GPa)	Strength(MPa)	Strain(%)
<b>Glass fibers</b>	2.56	72	3530	4.8
<b>Carbon</b>	1.4	235-827	2200-4410	0.27-1.5
<b>Oil palm empty fruit bunch fibers</b>	0.7-1.55	2.0	248	14
<b>Flax</b>	1.5	27.6	345-1035	2.7-3.2
<b>Jute</b>	1.3	26.5	393-773	1.5-1.8
<b>Sisal</b>	1.5	9.4-22.0	511-635	2.0-2.5
<b>Banana</b>	1.4	7-20	500-700	1-4
<b>Pineapple</b>	1.44	35-80	400-1600	0.8-1.6
<b>Softwood</b>	1.4	10-50	100-170	-
<b>Hardwood</b>	1.4	10-70	90-180	-

According to Bledzki *et al.* (1999), high cellulose content and smaller spiral angle would result in the increase of the lignocellulose fiber strength. On the other hand, Lilholt and Lawther (2002), stressed that the strength of lignocellulose fibers are strongly affected by various factors such as the structure of the fibers, orientation of molecular chains, imperfection or defects in the fibers and the degree of polymerization.

The regions with non-crystalline structure such as the amorphous regions in the cell wall of the lignocellulose fibers are considered as weak points owing to low number of chains per cross sectional area which are unable to withstand the stresses effectively. The orientation of the crystalline components influences the strength of the fibers. High strength fibers are normally achieved with alignments within about  $5^{\circ}$  of perfect orientation. The imperfection in the fiber structure such as the presence of fiber bundles which results in non uniform stress distribution, traces of oil especially found on oil palm fibers and cracks on the fiber surface reduces the strength of the lignocellulose fibers. The strength of highly oriented lignocellulose fibers are affected by the degree of polymerization. Lilholt and Lawther (2002) also explained that the strength of the fibers is inversely proportional to the degree of polymerization.

#### **2.3.4 Oil Palm Empty Fruit Bunch Fiber and Its Composites**

Oil palm empty fruit bunch fibers (EFB) which are derived from an oil palm tree (*Elais guineensis*) component namely the empty fruit bunch were used as a reinforcement in this study rather than other lignocellulosic fibers because oil palm trees are abundant and are also an important commercial plant in Malaysia. The total area of oil palm plantation in Malaysia is about 2.5 million hectares (Mohammad *et al.*, 2000). The oil palm fruits are processed in mills and crude palm oil is extracted from these fruits. The oil palm industry in Malaysia produces about 10.5 million tones of crude palm oil per annum and produces a massive amount of biomass waste. One of the bio mass waste produced is the empty fruit bunches which are left behind after removal of oil palm fruits for the oil refining process at the oil refineries. Based on a report by Tanaka (2003), 16 million tons per annum of empty fruit bunches were discharged from each oil palm refinery in the country regularly in the

year 2000. The empty fruit bunches are then used as boiler feedstock in the oil mill and are also left to mulch and degrade as soil fertilizers in the field while the majority of the empty fruit bunches are unutilized. According to Kim (2003), the oil palm empty fruit bunch which are disposed in the oil palm estates as soil fertilizers, takes a long time to break down and hence during the rainy season it provides an ideal condition for fungi to grow which is the main cause of ganoderma disease. Therefore by using the oil palm empty fruit bunch fibers which were extracted from the empty fruit bunches as a reinforcement in composite materials, the biomass waste generated by the oil palm industry can be reduced significantly.

The usage of oil palm empty fruit bunch fibers as a reinforcement in composite materials have gained interest among scientists especially those in the South East Asia region where oil palm is a major industrial cultivation. Pioneer work on the oil palm fibers were done by Sreekala *et al.* (1997). They conducted a thorough study on the morphology, chemical composition, surface modifications and mechanical properties of oil palm fibers alone. The thermal behavior of oil palm fiber reinforced phenol-formaldehyde composites were studied by Agarwal *et al.* (2000). They reported that surface modifications of oil palm fibers by alkali, potassium permanganate and peroxide treatments enhanced the thermal stability of the lignocellulose composites. Moreover, composites treated by peroxides exhibited the highest thermal stability compared to the other chemical treatments.

Hill and Abdul Khalil (2000a) who studied the effect of acetylation and the usage of silane and titanate coupling agents on the mechanical properties of oil palm fiber reinforced polyester composite, concluded that chemical treatment of the fibers improved the mechanical properties of the composites. Furthermore, in a separate study, Hill and Abdul Khalil (2000b) reported that acetylation of the oil palm fibers resulted in good retention of

mechanical properties of the oil palm fiber composite during soil and water exposure tests. Recently, Abdul Khalil *et al.* (2002a) reported that, oil palm flour filled polyester composite offered better mechanical and chemical resistant properties compared to calcium carbonate filled polyester composite.

Oil palm empty fruit bunch filled thermoplastic composites were studied by Rozman *et al.* (1998). In their study, they observed that as the oil palm empty fruit bunch filler loading increased in the high density polyethylene, the modulus of elasticity and modulus of rupture of the composite increased and decreased respectively. The tensile and impact properties were found to decrease with the increasing oil palm empty fruit bunch filler in the composite. In addition, smaller sized empty fruit bunch filler particles displayed higher modulus of elasticity and modulus of rupture compared to larger filler particle size. In order to improve the compatibility between lignocellulose fibers and polypropylene matrix, Rozman *et al.* (2001a) used hexamethylene diisocyanate (HMDI) modified lignin as coupling agents in oil palm empty fruit bunch filled polypropylene composite and observed a significant increase in the flexural strength of the composite. Besides working on thermoplastic composites, Rozman and co-workers (2001b) also produced oil palm empty fruit bunch-polyurethane composites by reacting the oil palm fibers and polyethylene glycol (PEG) with diphenylmethane diisocyanate (MDI). It was found that the tensile properties were influenced by the percentage of OH groups of the oil palm fibers together with the reinforcing effect of the oil palm fibers.